

Boundary County Teens Hone Writing Skills Thanks to Wal-Mart Grant

Boundary County's development of a robust, diversified local economy has been hampered by a lack of workers with a broad range of marketable job skills. Recent community assessments identified the need for more educational resources for older youth that support the development of marketable job skills. Thanks to a \$5,000 grant from Wal-Mart, the library was able to target this need through the creation of a youth writing workshop series.

The library expanded their youth services capabilities in new directions by implementing this program that involved older youth and supported academic achievement and workforce training. A total of 18 workshops in the art, craft, and business of writing for students in grades 6th through 12th were held throughout the county. Local talent provided the workshops and two local professional writers brought years of experience as educators to help develop age-appropriate topics.

In addition to the workshops, the teens developed an online "zine" which provided them with hands-on experience in the strategic planning and process from establishing a sustainable enterprise. They went through the entire process of developing a mission statement and submission policy, to creating a marketable business plan or grant application to secure future funding. An exciting outcome of this aspect of the project was when the high school's media literacy class decided to adopt the 'zine as an ongoing project ensuring sustainability for years to come.



The program lost two key partners early in the process when the organization ruralnorthwest.com – parent company to *Boundary Digest* - closed its doors for economic reasons. Additionally, a local middle school closed its afterschool program which eliminated a small target audience for the workshops. Regardless of these struggles, the project moved forward and found new and innovative ways to compensate for the losses.

Former staff at the *Boundary Digest* continued to assist in both the planning and implementation of the project's workshops, and with the development of the online 'zine. Outthereandbeyond.org was officially launched at the library during Teen Tech Week in March 2010. As a not-for-profit venture, the 'zine was designated as a collaborative partnership with the Boundary Community Coalition for Families. Now at the end of their first project year another team of media literacy students has taken over the publication and it will continue to evolve as an online magazine "for youth, by youth."

The community received a huge surprise when Chris Crutcher, award-winning Young Adult author, agreed to present workshops for the project. Because of Crutcher's widespread popularity and the wonderful opportunity presented by his enthusiasm for their project, high school administrators gladly rearranged the normal school schedule

to accommodate two split assemblies. This flexibility was crucial in making it possible for about 500 youth, 40 teachers, and a large contingent of other adults to hear Crutcher speak. As it turned out, most of the adult guests were members of a Chris Crutcher book group. After the workshop, Crutcher also met separately with the youth team and advisors working on the project's online magazine to provide feedback and guidance.



Librarian Sandy Ashworth wrote about the impact Chris Crutcher's event had on her and on the community. "The event with Crutcher provided one of those moments that make this job the joy that it is. It was a chance to 'show and tell' 500 of 'my kids' how important their success is to all of us at the library." She continued, "We're used to the preschool set wanting to give us a hug, and some of our teenage girls. It is

the first time I have had a six-foot eighteen-year old boy knocking on my office door to say thank you with a hug!"

The library has several ideas how they want to build on the foundation established through this project. Their first priority will be growing *outthereandbeyond.org* in conjunction with its youth staff and faculty advisors. As an outreach project for the 'zine, they are sponsored a Poetry Slam in May 2010. Additionally, they are developing materials for "online writing workshops" with one of their local writers. It is designed to aid parents working with their homeschooled or public school students and will be available 24/7 through the library's website. They hope to start a library sponsored youth writers' group this summer as well.

Next on their "to do" list is increasing resources and other support for a Senior English business development project. The more they worked with the teacher in charge of this class, the more potential they could see for turning the class project into a very effective youth business incubator. They have had preliminary discussions with a number of potential partners including the Boundary Economic Development Council, Chamber of Commerce, North Idaho College, and the Department of Labor. They are looking at ways to increase new education and mentoring resources for students.

Most recently Chris Crutcher agreed to assist the library with their Big Read program this year and they have already formed a steering committee to assist with the planning. The program will focus on fostering intergenerational connections and dialogue regarding the crucial youth health and safety issues raised in Crutcher's books. These issues – from domestic violence, child abuse, and bullying to bigotry and mental illness – impact the whole community. They hope to raise public awareness and increase and improve community resources for youth and families.

Overall the library feels that the results of the project supported their proposed outcomes. The partnerships developed through the project will continue to benefit teens and the entire community in the coming years.